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ABSTRACT

The problem of college students' writing skills as lack thereof is generally agreed upon by academics. One cause is the inordinate amount of multiple choice/true false/fill in the blank type of tests that students take in high school and college. Not only is there a dearth of actual classes in writing available, few students recognize the need to improve their writing, nor are inclined to invest the time, effort, and energy to do so. While computer spell and grammar checks only minimally improve writing quality, computer programs such as Writer, Writer's Options, and others can help improve writing. There is, however, a lack of consensus among educators about the importance of writing and about the steps needed to enhance writing or the awareness of writing as a crucial skill. Instructors may find assistance in helping students learn to write in writing clinics on the World Wide Web. (CR)

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"Righting" the Writing Problem

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The problem of college students writing skills (or lack thereof) is one of the generally agreed upon problems in academia. Students being unable to write a grammatically correct sentence, in proper tense, with appropriate syntax and employ higher order thinking is a phenomenon that concerns many in several disciplines. The English Department is invariably blamed, and they in turn blame the high schools who in turn blame a diminished seriousness of purpose in the public schools in America. All teachers blame overcrowded classrooms, mainstreaming and inclusion and discipline problems.

One reason for poor writing skills is the inordinate amount of multiple choice/true false/fill in the blank types of tests that students take in high school and throughout their college careers. Thus, when required to write a term paper in a junior or senior level class, their weaknesses become readily apparent. One student when told of the writing requirement in one class indicated that they would simply take the class with another more lenient instructor.

A second reason for poor writing skills is the dearth of actual classes in writing. Many English classes offer discussion of books, plays, poems, short stories and essays, but very few are specifically designed to ameliorate writing skills.

Further, few students recognize the need to improve their writing, nor are they inclined to invest the time,

effort and energy into improving their writing skills.

While there are "technical writing skill" classes, in this, as in any other area, there is a limited amount of time, and competing demands.

A third concern voiced by many students is their preoccupation with the objective test format and the idea of a "correct or right" answer. Many students have been literally indoctrinated with a mind set that deals with one specific correct response. Writing on the other hand is subjectively graded and is based on the quality of the student's writing skills and their ability to express themselves well in an organized format.

With the advent of the computer and "Spell Check" and "Grammar Check" students are able to use technology to at least enhance their writing and minimally improve their skills. However, some students may be only marginally able to effectively use the computer assistance for the enhancement of their writing. Students may spell the words "their" and "there" correctly but use them in an improper fashion. The same is true for the words "to, two, and too".

In a similar vein, students who make errors often blame the computer and fail to accept responsibility for their own mistakes.

Word Processing programs allow students to submit a paper that may look aesthetically pleasing to the instructor, but be filled with errors of grammar and syntax.

Laser printers may allow students to "print out" a very nice appearing paper that is laden with dangling participles and other difficulties.

There are several computer generated programs designed to help improve writing. Aztec, Writer's Options and several others are available, if students employ these programs.

There is a lack of consensus among educators as to the importance of writing in the larger scheme of things. Math instructors certainly are not losing sleep at nights regarding the writing skills of their students. Music and art teachers are also not fretting about the quality of writing and composition. And, in some fields, such as home economics, robotics, theater and fine arts, there is less concern about commas, periods and apostrophe's than in other fields of endeavor.

There is also a lack of consensus in the field as to the steps needed to enhance writing or the awareness of writing as a crucial skill. There are some in the field that believe that eventually with computers and the internet that we will be "Icon" driven. That is, we will employ icons to guide and direct us through the internet and the World Wide Web. Said icons will begin to have universal meaning and provide guidance and direction for students and other individuals.

Many colleges cater to the "non traditional student" that has been away from the campus for several years. In

many cases, the writing skills of these students have deteriorated quite extensively. For twenty years, they may not have had the opportunity to write anything other than letters or shopping lists. The deterioration of these skills is extensive.

As in most areas, teachers, parents, and potential employers want to know what can be done to remediate the poor writing skills of students. The following suggestions are offered :

Schools need to:

- * provide students with frequent writing assignments
- * give students a wide variety of writing assignments: stories, reports, letters, poems, journals
- * provide students with examples of good writing
- * teach students how good writers approach writing
- * how they organize their thoughts, brainstorm, revise and work with others to improve their final work;
- * provide students with constructive and honest feedback on their writing, including suggestions for how to improve future writing assignments
- * hold students to high standards

In terms of students, several attitudes need to be addressed if not changed. Many students believe that in terms of writing, quantity is more important than quality. What students then tend to do, is simply to write more, quote more and believe that this satisfies the instructors requirements. They ignore organization, fluidity, and grammar and syntax.

With the advent of word processing, editing has become a process whereby the student goes into his or her work on

disk and corrects the errors that have been circled by the instructor.

Parents can help their children become better writers by encouraging good writing skills early. Younger children should be encouraged to

- * write to pen pals
- * write letters and postcards to family members
- * keep a diary or journal
- * help write a family newsletter to send to relatives
- * compose poems, or rewrite favorite poems to tell their own story;
- * write and illustrate stories they can share;

At the college level, the concerns about writing increase dramatically for a number of reasons that need to be clearly understood. In college, students are able to pick and choose courses by catalog description, by the instructor's reputation, and by the course syllabus, which often indicates how much writing is required, and the weight of the writing assignments. Thus, students who do not like to write, or are weak in their writing skills often meticulously preview courses, course requirements, and the type of tests given in that course. If a course has heavy writing demands, students will scrupulously avoid that course (or that instructor) and take other general education requirements. If a student knows that one instructor employs multiple choice tests extensively, then he/she will take that course and perhaps others with that instructor. At the college level, student are more likely to balk and complain about assignments requiring writing and opt for

other alternative assignments. Since the assessment of writing is subjective rather than objective, students will often use the faculty evaluation form as a forum to complain about that instructor. Some students will even change majors and or minors once they ascertain the writing demands of certain courses. For some students who work part time, this is understandable. For others, for example in teacher education programs, writing is needed, since many elementary teachers teach writing within the context of their content area.

Some instructors will confess that they simply do not know how to teach writing and teach it well. They do not know what is involved in the process of remediation of writing, nor do they have the time to devote to grading and re-grading papers. Some instructors have inordinate amounts of "committee work" to attend to, and competent graduate students are few and far between.

Writing Clinics on the Web

Very recently, a number of writing clinics have appeared on the World Wide Web. These may assist teachers to help students write a bit more correctly. A few of the main "writing clinics" are :

Purdue University OWL (Online Writing Lab) at
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

Dakota State University Online Writing Lab at
<http://www.dsu.edu/departments/liberal/cola/OWL/>

University of Missouri Online Writery

<http://www.missouri.edu/~wleric/writery.html>

DeVry Institute of Technology Online Writing Support Center
<http://www.devry-phx.edu/Irnresrc/dowsc/>

University of Michigan Online Writing Lab
<http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/writing-lab/Homepage.html>

Roane State Community College Online Writing Lab
<http://fur.rsc.ccc.tn.us/OWL/OWL.html>

Zucca (1996) has provided an overview of these online writing clinics on the world wide web and these resources are growing in depth and complexity.

Basically, it is incumbent upon the student to get to the Internet and spend time, effort and energy to remediate their weaknesses and get feedback regarding their work.

Instructors must hold students to high standards and prepare students for the fact that writing is important and will be more important in the future.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has reviewed a most exasperating topic in college education. The improvement of writing skills requires time, effort, energy and patience on the part of both student and instructor. Without a firm commitment of support from administration and without a firm commitment from students to improve their grammar, syntax and sentence structure, alas, there is little chance of success.

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